

The Flood Leads on to Fortune

It was supposed to be the day that Shakespeare became a god – but Thursday 7 September 1769, day two of the Great Shakespeare Jubilee, could not have got off to a more disastrous start. When a deafening volley of cannon fire began at 6am, it seemed to herald the opening of the heavens, so that the visitors and residents of Stratford-upon-Avon awoke to pouring rain. The poorly-paved streets liquefied, as did the charm of the festival's provincial setting. The Stratford that emerged was cramped, filthy and saturated.

Squinting through the vaporous haze a little before noon, residents would have been able to make out a small entourage scurrying towards the large wooden venue built on what remained of the Avon's riverbanks. The group was led by one of the most famous men in Britain, David Garrick: the great actor, playwright, theatre-manager and mastermind of the Jubilee. He was not in a good mood. That morning, his barber had cut his face while shaving him. After a contentious row with his business partner James Lacy (who exclaimed 'who the devil, Davy, would venture upon the procession under such a lowering aspect?'), he had grudgingly cancelled the grand pageant of Shakespeare's characters he had promised his audience. Now, hurrying towards the wooden Rotunda with his stockings glued to his legs, he could feel a cold coming on. But what troubled Garrick most of all was that he knew how much was now riding on his performance that afternoon. He had built his career around performing Shakespeare, of which this Jubilee was supposed to be the apotheosis. Unless he brought the house down with his Ode to Shakespeare, the festival he had staked his name on would be deemed an utter failure.

The Rotunda had been hastily erected in a water meadow by the river after Garrick realised Stratford did not have a theatre big enough to accommodate all of his visitors. It had looked impressive on the opening day of the Jubilee, but now it was slowly unmooring, threatened by the ever-rising Avon, and rain was damaging the painted screens fronting the venue that had been so beautifully illuminated the night before.

2,000 shivering, soaking spectators were crammed inside, along with 100 members of a choir and orchestra, waiting for his recital. This would be a tough audience: most had come from London, a distance of over 100 miles. Garrick was a true virtuoso and a veteran actor, but he was now in his fifties, slower and weaker than he used to be. (Just a few months prior, he had risen from what he called ‘ye bed of death’, having been laid low by an excruciating combination of fever, gout, jaundice and kidney stones.) He had written the Ode himself, and it was not yet known if his skills as an author would be equal to the occasion. His enemies were salivating at the prospect of his humiliation. As midday struck, the cannon fired once more and Garrick took to the stage beneath a statue of the Bard. This was it. Could he salvage some success from the muddy trench fate had flung it into?

Garrick’s Great Shakespeare Jubilee is so fascinating because, despite being an almost unmitigated flop, it can legitimately claim to have had lasting impact on Shakespeare’s reputation. It was a folly of staggering proportions; but it was also the world’s first literary festival and sparked a lucrative tourist industry. A chaotic potpourri of vast egos, grubby self-promotion, overreach and mismanagement, it was by turns ridiculous, ambitious, pathetic, impressive and absurd. As Andrew McConnell Stott, author of a highly entertaining 2019 book about the Jubilee, puts it: ‘It was a little bit like Woodstock, a little bit like Coachella, and a little too much like the Fyre Festival. It was pretty much a disaster – and did more for Shakespeare’s home town than anything has ever since.’ Less well known is the unique role that papers of the time, such as *The London Magazine*, played in the organisation, promotion and cultural afterlife of the Jubilee. As we shall discover, without *The London Magazine* and its competitors, the Jubilee would not have become an inflection point in the history of Shakespeare’s reputation – or even have happened at all.

What would become an extravaganza had modest, even accidental, beginnings. The mayor and aldermen of Stratford-upon-Avon wanted some paintings and a statue for their new town hall building. They cannily decided to approach Garrick, who was known to be both extremely wealthy and highly susceptible to flattery. (Oliver Goldsmith, in his poem ‘Retaliation’, described him thus: ‘Of praise a mere glutton, he swallowed

what came, / And the puff of a dunce, he mistook it for fame’.) The Stratford councillors offered to display portraits of Shakespeare and Garrick himself in their town hall in exchange for funding, but Garrick, who saw himself ‘as Shakespeare’s vicar on earth’, in the words of his biographer Ian McIntyre, detected an opportunity for something more. A grand festival that transformed the Bard’s home town into a live theatre performance, headlined by Garrick himself, would be a magnificent spectacle, not to mention a coup of self-promotion. Moreover, it could be used by Garrick to signal his promotion from a waning actor to a new kind of role, what Stott calls ‘the cultural custodian of Britain’.

While Garrick’s ideas for the Jubilee were still forming, the Stratfordians decided to force his hand. The town clerk sent paragraphs to the newspapers announcing that Garrick ‘has accepted the stewardship’ of a ‘jubile [sic] in honour and to the memory of Shakespeare’ in their town, and the press ran with it. The May 1769 issue of *The London Magazine* contains one such announcement, with the particularly bold assertion that the Jubilee ‘will be kept up every seventh year’. Now on the back foot, Garrick decided formally to announce the event on May 18, in his final performance of the season at the Drury Lane Theatre. ‘My eyes, till then, no sights like these will see,’ he addressed the crowd,

Unless we meet at Shakespeare’s Jubilee!
On Avon’s Banks, where flowers eternal blow!
Like its full stream our Gratitude shall flow!

The councillors may have had the initiative at first, but they were not prepared for what Garrick, ‘full stream’ ahead, would do next. He commissioned a double portrait from Thomas Gainsborough for the town hall: Garrick reclining against a bust of the Bard, his arm lovingly draped around Shakespeare’s pedestal. This picture and its frame ended up costing £194 – a quarter of the entire cost of the new town hall. If the town fathers expected Garrick to pay, they were in for a rude awakening. ‘In him,’ wrote Christian Deelman, author of *The Great Shakespeare Jubilee*, ‘the Corporation had caught a bigger fish than they could handle.’

Garrick drew up plans for a hugely ambitious celebration: three days

of songs, masked balls and pageants, culminating in his reading of the Dedication Ode, scored by the Drury Lane orchestra and delivered before a statue of Shakespeare he had gifted to the town. There would be dinners and lunches, bonfires and fireworks, and horse races run in Shakespeare's honour. All the town would become a stage: songs would be sung outside Shakespeare's birthplace and musicians would promenade through the streets. The Rotunda was constructed near where the Royal Shakespeare Theatre stands today. The famous Thomas Arne wrote new music for the occasion.

Conspicuously absent from all of this was the work of the Jubilee's honoree. The most absurd, enigmatic, perplexing thing about the Jubilee is that not a single Shakespeare play or even scene was performed during it. Rather, it seemed to reach out in almost every other possible direction. Its hodgepodge nature and the bizarre diminishment of its central subject could not help but give an impression that there was something ominously hollow about the event. There are, therefore, some uncomfortable parallels between the Jubilee and a more recent folly, the Millennium Dome, with its incoherent, 'sub-Disney' blandness. Perhaps, however, there was some Hamlet-like method in Garrick's madness. Kate Rumbold argues that, by becoming 'the symbolic escape of Shakespeare from his plays, ready for global appropriation', the Jubilee did something very significant. The Bard was about to become the Brand.

To drum up anticipation of the Jubilee amongst London's fashionables, Garrick needed the help of the papers, and *The London Magazine* was happy to oblige. (Its editor, Edward Kimber, had actually written a strange *roman-à-clef* about Garrick, called *The Juvenile Adventures of David Ranger*, a decade earlier.) The August 1769 issue thus began with a 'Life of Mr. William Shakespeare', followed by a (much longer) 'History of Mr. David Garrick', taking for granted that the 'Stratford jubilee' is 'now an object of universal attention'. In a taste of what was to come in the Jubilee proper, the author concerns himself very little with Shakespeare's actual work, adding drily 'The plays of this great author are too well known, and too universally admired, to be enumerated in this place.' He concludes: 'Upon the whole, the public expectation is greatly excited'; and 'there can be no great reason to suppose that this expectation will be disappointed'.



The Rotunda during the Jubilee, complete with ominous storm clouds



Crowds gather outside Shakespeare's birthplace. This print is one of many that mixes fact with fiction. The pageant never took place in Stratford but it did take place in the following months on the stage of the Drury Lane Theatre



Garrick reciting his Ode to Shakespeare



David Garrick leaning on a bust of Shakespeare, after Gainsborough's original from 1769. The original painting was destroyed by fire in 1946



J. Wale del. J. Miller sc.
JAMES BOSWELL Esq^r.
In the Dress of an Armed Corsican Chief, as he appear'd at Shakespeare's Jubilee, at Stratford upon Avon September 1769.

James Boswell in his Corsican outfit, engraving printed in The London Magazine, September 1769

That ‘Upon the whole’ was doing a lot of work, for many were not quite so enraptured by the prospect. The writer Horace Walpole blushed to hear of Garrick’s ‘nonsense’, while actor-manager Samuel Foote scoffed at Garrick’s ‘avarice and vanity...to fleece the people and transmit his name down to posterity, hand in hand with Shakespeare’. Garrick had a very close relationship with the press, and it has even been suggested that he might have seeded some of this criticism himself, in order to generate controversy and interest in the event. However, significant people were genuinely unimpressed: including Samuel Johnson, the great man of letters who had travelled to London with Garrick from their home town of Lichfield, and had briefly been Garrick’s school teacher. Even though Johnson had published his own edition of Shakespeare four years previously, he didn’t care to write anything for the occasion, boycotting it entirely. In his excellent book about Johnson, *The Club*, Leo Damrosch suggests the doctor likely saw the Jubilee as little more than a self-promotional stunt by his old pupil.

Reaction to the event from the citizens of Stratford was also mixed. Garrick himself complained before the event of the ‘Country people’ of Stratford, who ‘did not seem to relish our *Jubilee*’, thinking it ‘Popish’ or ‘devil-raising’. Rumours abounded that there would be a mass of some kind attempting to resurrect Shakespeare. Though this was hysterical, it didn’t come from nowhere. The word ‘jubilee’ was closely associated with the Catholic Church, which used it to describe a year of pilgrimage. Indeed, the Jubilee was a secular pilgrimage of sorts, and Garrick had designed the songs and the toasts honouring his muse in a eucharistic way. (Shakespeare would be hailed as ‘immortal’, ‘divine’, a ‘conjurer’ and the ‘lad of all lads’.) More conspiratorially, ‘jubilee’ sounded to some like ‘Jew Bill’, the deeply controversial law of 1753 passed to grant British Jews more rights and expand their enfranchisement. Garrick’s subsequent play about the events in Stratford includes a local who talks of ‘Shakespur and the Jewbill.’ The subtext is that the Jubilee could only be appreciated fully by an educated elite – the sort who read *The London Magazine*.

With his celebrity influencer status and some savvy marketing, Garrick succeeded in luring an army of Londoners to Stratford. But problems arose almost immediately to test the Jubilites’ jubulance. Stratford was

overbooked: the single road into town was completely blocked, with carriages backed up for miles. And, of course, nobody seems to have thought about the likelihood of bad weather in September, which laid waste to Garrick's meticulously planned schedule. The fireworks display was snuffed out, tents were flooded and a wall collapsed, injuring the main VIP, Lord Carlisle. The Rotunda would eventually have to be abandoned after guests found themselves splashing about in water up to their ankles.

Let us now return to Garrick stepping onto the stage, poised to begin reading his Ode to Shakespeare to a hushed crowd on that soggy Thursday afternoon. The Ode was a sort of *recitative*, or spoken-word song, with the orchestra swelling behind Garrick's words and climaxing in choral sections. The poem itself was a curious, mutant beast: long, meandering and multi-faceted. This gobbet gives a sense of the Ode's erratic rhythms and rhyme schemes, as well as its strange fusion of vocabularies – part hymn, part incantation:

'Tis he! 'tis he!
"The god of our idolatry!"
To him the song, the edifice we raise,
He merits all our wonder, all our praise!
Yet ere impatient joy break forth,
In sounds that lift the soul from the earth;
And to our spell-bound-minds impart
Some faint idea of his magic art;
Let awful silence still the air!
From the dark cloud, the hidden light
Bursts tenfold bright!
Prepare! Prepare! Prepare!

Here, Shakespeare is pagan and magical – leaving minds 'spell-bound' – yet also a 'god', whose celebrations are 'lifting the soul from earth'. Style-wise, Garrick's mission statement seems to have been 'things that sound like Shakespeare but aren't' – a snatch of Milton here, a flash of Dryden there. But what really mattered was less the content of the Ode than its delivery: and happily, by all accounts Garrick delivered a bravura

performance. Everybody in the Rotunda burst into rapturous applause. Thomas Arne's music was a success, too. Garrick had written the lyrics, and some of songs became popular afterward, including a ballad named 'Warwickshire' that is still the regimental march of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment: 'Of famous Will Congreve we boast too the skill, / But the Will of all Wills was a Warwickshire Will'. Garrick had saved the occasion.

Open the September 1769 issue of *The London Magazine* and you will find the Jubilee already beginning to gain mythic status and be memorialised, inflated, and cherry-picked. It begins with a letter from James Boswell, the lawyer, diarist and future biographer of Samuel Johnson, recounting the delightful time he had spent at the Jubilee. Terminally pompous but undeniably good fun, Boswell was enjoying what he called a period of 'newspaper fame' due to his recently published *Account of Corsica*, which recounted his trip to the embattled island. As an opportunity to bask in his newfound notoriety in distinguished and rarefied company, the Jubilee was exactly what he wanted. His piece in *The London Magazine* let him gush over the event, fight back against its critics and, most importantly, preserve for posterity a description and engraving of the authentic Corsican rebel soldier's costume he had worn to the masquerade. 'What was the Stratford jubilee?' he wrote:

not a piece of farce...but an elegant and truly classical celebration...
My bosom glowed with joy when I beheld a numerous and brilliant
company of nobility and gentry, the rich, the brave, the witty, and
the fair, assembled to pay their tribute of praise to Shakespeare.

Boswell called the performance of the Dedication Ode 'noble and affecting...The whole audience were mixed in the most earnest attention, and I do believe, that if any one had attempted to disturb the performance, he would have been in danger of his life.' He emphasised the nobility of the event, despite its lacklustre execution. 'Taking the whole of this jubilee, said I, is like eating an artichoke entire. We have some fine mouthfuls, but also swallow the leaves and the hair, which are confoundedly difficult of digestion. After all, however, I am highly satisfied with my artichoke.'

When it was all over and Garrick's hairy artichoke was well and truly

digested, the actor had lost a great deal of money – as much as £2,000. With typically Puckish resourcefulness, Garrick quickly made amends. Like the prints of the Jubilee that had started appearing in the papers, combining fact and fiction (depicting, for instance, the parade that never actually happened), Garrick began to spin his short-term loss into long-term gain. Back at Drury Lane, he staged the pageant that had been rained off. Entitled *The Jubilee*, it achieved a record run for any piece of theatre in the entire century, making up for the loss four times over. With the advantage of a stage, the actors were even able to perform miniature scenes from the plays. Garrick appeared as Benedick from *Much Ado* and one actor borrowed Boswell's Corsican costume, appearing as James Boswell. (Boswell, though, was back home in Edinburgh, so unfortunately he missed the opportunity to applaud himself on the stage.)

As contradictory as it might be, the initial failure of the Great Shakespeare Jubilee may have been part of its success. It certainly contributed to the length of its afterlife in the cultural imagination. Shakespeare's reputation would rise ever higher, amplified by the contrast between his transcendent greatness and the disappointment of Garrick's attempts to celebrate him; the Swan of Avon continued to elude us mere mortals, who are incapable of doing justice to his genius.

Garrick had also sown the seeds for successive Shakespeareans to nurture, refining and completing what he had started. In 1824 the Shakespeare Club was founded in Stratford, who decided to re-stage the Jubilee every three years. The first of these was in 1827, closely modelled on Garrick's original schedule: this time the pageant went ahead. The 1830 Jubilee was the first during which a play by Shakespeare was performed. And nowadays, of course, millions of people visit Stratford from all over the world, actors in the ongoing show for which Garrick wrote the prologue.